

A Salute to the Spy who Saved a New England Town

By NANCY ANNE DAWE

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When a Fairfax, VA, jury found Pakistani Mir Aimal Kasi guilty Monday of murdering 2 CIA employees in January 1993, news coverage didn't identify the victims. Nameless and faceless, they simply remained 2 men shot by a sniper while turning their vehicles into CIA headquarters.

But 4 years ago I'd been shocked when a friend called my Atlanta home from Boston to say that Lansing Bennett had been one of those killed.

At the time, newspapers were identifying the victims as "analysts of covert operations or undercover spies." But we had known a different Lansing Bennett: Years before, in our historic seaside town of Duxbury, Mass., he was a physician, an enlightened conservationist with whom we and other volunteers had worked as he set unprecedented national standards, and a friend whose horses my daughter took care of when his family was out of town.

Bennett had come to Duxbury in 1952, after having searched the New England coast to find a town in which he wanted to practice. Two scenes had shaped his conservation thought. As a boy, he had frequently ridden a pony over a large hill that later became the city of Cherry Hill, NJ. And he had first practiced medicine in a town where, to quote him, "whole orchards were bulldozed down, and row houses sprang up in a week. It was frightening."

He wasn't going to let that happen to Duxbury. In spite of a busy medical practice, he became Conservation Commission chairman, after an expressway opened in the mid-'60s that put the town within easy reach of Boston.

The depth and scope of his work were astonishing. Aided by townspeople drawn by his magnetism, he oversaw the town's commitment to conservation, thus preserving it to perpetuity its irreplaceable salt-marshes, inland forests and waterways, and ensuring that future generations enjoyed the beauty that Pilgrims John and Priscilla Alden had found there in colonial days.

A pure water supply was forever ensured by the purchase of acres of land surrounding the aquifers, and landmark legislation was written updating wetlands restrictions.

After his death, the *Duxbury Clipper* newspaper reminded the town of its debt:

"What you bought when you chose Duxbury is almost entirely attributable to the tireless work of Lansing Bennett. If many others shared his vision of a town spared from running amuck in suburban sprawl, Bennett stood out as the clear leader of modern-day resource conservation and wildlife protection. He was the one who strategized the passage of countless land-acquisition proposals at town meetings; he was the one who persuaded voters to invest in growth management as an alternative to endlessly financing the effects of unchecked development.

What made Bennett's work so memorable and unique is that he had no personal gain from the outcome of more than a decade of conservation and public-health leadership in the community. Bennett did what he did because it was the right thing to do.... What he gave Duxbury has a permanence that far surpasses the time he lived here."

Boyishly handsome, with an impish grin, Bennett had a quicksilver mind. He read a lot, wrote far into the night, and had a restless energy and adventurous spirit that told him, at age 50, it was time to move on.

My friend and I went to his going-away party before he left town to join the U.S. State Department. Over the years, we heard he was in the Far East, then the tropics. We heard he had divorced, remarried, and then, in 1991, had had a serious operation. But clearly, he was back in the saddle the day he met his fate.

No matter where he was in his post-Duxbury days, his legacy was influencing our lives. I became a writer when asked for a feature related to his work. My friend, energized by our conservation efforts, studied environmental sciences at Harvard, and today administers grants for a natural-gas pipeline company for programs of land acquisition, conservation and enhancement of pipeline-impacted communities. A Duxbury environmental lawyer went on to help Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard legislatively shape their ecological destinies; while his wife became co-founder of the now-International Association of Professional Landscape Designers.

Bennett once told my friend that while visiting nursing homes, he always fished the old folks there "for memories to cherish." The memories are ours now: of Lansing Bennett, CIA — Central Intelligence Agency and Conservationist-In-Action — the "spy" who saved a town, then gave his last full measure to his country.

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